

Conspiracies beyond Fake News. Producing Reinformation on Presidential Elections in the Transnational Hybrid Media System

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As presidential elections carry the promise of distilling the contested and elusive “will of the people,” the protracted media event intensifies the public demand for exposing the transgressions of the aspiring political elite. This expectation provides fertile ground for investigative journalism, ultrapartisan smear campaigns, fake news, and full-fledged conspiracy theories that are sometimes difficult to differentiate from one another in a hybridized media space. We compare three unique conspiracy stories—*Macron-leaks*, *Pizzagate*, and *Voter fraud*—emerging during the previous French and American elections. We assess the divergent strategies of social action that contribute to the stories’ dissimilar patterns for intervening the political news cycle with the “reinformative toolkit” and deconstruct the common conspiratorial “masterplot” for “reinforming” the public. Focusing on online “producers”—media users functioning as (dis)information producers—we analyze how the grassroots level participated in shaping the conspiracy stories’ synopses and channeling news-framed, conspiratory content between mainstream and “countermedia” outlets.

Introduction

Large-scale media events create fertile ground for generating disinformation in various narrative forms, often tailored to spread across the divergent range of “new” and “old” media platforms (Faris et al. 2017; Ferrara 2017). As highly mediatized presidential campaigns carry the promise of distilling the elusive and contested “will of the people,” they face journalistic scrutiny that seeks to poke holes in the candidates’ public image by revealing “inconvenient truths” (Gerstlé 2012; Mercier 2006). As the expectation of having the candidates’ true colors exposed is deeply internalized among the public (Linz 1990), such anticipation also creates the markets and demand for deeply biased, ultrapartisan smear campaigns (Vaccari and Morini 2014) that may evolve into full-fledged conspiracy stories.

In this article, we study three conspiracy stories that paint a picture of a corrupt “elite” that wields political power by secretly undermining democratic

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institutions for personal or political gain. *Pizzagate* and *Voter fraud* intervened in the political news cycle during the American 2016 presidential elections. The former alleged Hillary Clinton's involvement in a pedophile ring in the basement of a D.C. pizzeria, while the latter asserted that millions of immigrants and dead people were voting illegally. During the 2017 French presidential elections, *Macronleaks* leaked tampered documents linking Emmanuel Macron to money laundering, homosexuality, and drug use. Recently, several excellent studies have analyzed how these information campaigns sought to spread their conspiratory message across different media spaces (e.g., Cottrell, Herron, and Westwood 2018; Downing and Ahmed 2019; Rebillard 2017). Complementing these approaches, we adopt a comparative research setting to emphasize how a common conspiratory "masterplot" (Abbott 2008:47) and a "reinformative toolkit" of collective action can structure and facilitate interventions into political news cycle across hybridized media environments transnationally (Leskovec, Backstrom, and Kleinberg 2009; Chadwick 2011:5–6).

A key site for conspiracy theorizing can be located in the constellation of ultrapartisan "countermedia" outlets that publishes news-framed content aimed at discrediting "the elite establishment" at large, and eroding the trust in mainstream media (Ylä-Anttila, Bauvois, and Pyrhönen 2019; Ylä-Anttila 2017:46). Although mainstream and countermedia outlets typically disagree on framings and even the subject matter of the news events they cover, both types of outlets face many similar incentives that shape, structure, and monetize their output. Notwithstanding the divergent approaches to journalistic standards, newsworthiness and political agenda setting, both benefit from employing "media populist logic" (Mazzoleni 2003) of spreading emotionalized and polarizing news-framed content. An extreme instance of such strongly affective content, conspiracy theorizing exemplifies how this logic can be harnessed for channeling news-framed content in the interstices of mainstream and countermedia outlets, the so-called "hybrid media system" (Chadwick 2013).

Ongoing elections further accentuate the overlap in countermedia and mainstream coverage of the political elite. While countermedia-based conspiracy stories seek to "reinform" their audiences by attributing any and all societal problems to corrupt members of "the elite" (Blanc 2016), mainstream outlets fiercely compete to first expose presidential candidates' hidden networks, contacts, and activities. With emotionalized, story-framed misinformation on political topics circulating "significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth" (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018), it becomes notoriously difficult for audiences to differentiate between news-framed "scandals" that are built on rigorous journalistic work from those emerging in collectively curated rumors and disinformation. As a result, about one-third of both French and American citizens endorse one or more conspiracy stories (Fenster 2017; IFOP 2017).

In order to compare the three conspiracy stories' trajectories into the news cycle, we first present our theoretical framework, conceptualizing how interventions in "the hybrid media system" harness a "reinformativ toolkit" of practices that "produse" news-framed storylines following a conspiratory "masterplot." We then operationalize the theoretical framework with regard to our mixed-methods approach and the inductive process of data collection, allowing us to conduct the analysis in two sections. First, we delineate the hybridly mediatized body of "leaks" and "scandals," pinpointing the critical junctures of conspiracy theorizing in the dataset to be examined as reinformative interventions. We then proceed to analyze the rich narrative subject matter as building blocks of the conspiratory masterplot, focusing on the masterplot's reinformative functions in the polarized public debate on presidential elections. We conclude in a discussion of divergent avenues for produsing conspiratory reinformation and channeling political fable in the hybrid media system.

Theoretical Framework: The Produsage of Reinformation within the Hybrid Media System

Macronleaks, *Pizzagate*, and *Voter fraud* are examples of highly spreadable, transnationally reported, produser-generated, ultrapartisan campaigns that span the media space from online sphericules and countermedia to mainstream news outlets. The combination of such modes of political communication has sometimes been regarded as epitomizing the so-called "post-truth era" (Barrera Rodriguez et al. 2018; Keyes 2004; McGranahan 2017; Wiewiorka 2017), whose constitutive narrative elements and practices often become unproblematically labeled as "disinformation" and "fake news" in public debate (Lazer et al. 2018; Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook 2017). By comparing these conspiracy stories as *hybridly mediatize produsage of reinformation*, we illustrate a nuanced process of online storytelling, where produsers harnessing practices in the reinformative toolkit collectively curate news-framed content into a conspiratory masterplot that penetrates mainstream gatekeeping.

There is notable scholarship on polarizing mechanisms in online opinion formation, conceptualized as the emergence of "filter bubbles" that structure available information (Pariser 2012), the introduction of semi-hermetic "sphericules" (Galston 2003; Gitlin 1998; Papacharissi 2002), or even "information cocoons" for preaching to the converted (Sunstein 2008). This literature, epitomizing an "echo chamber" approach to online opinion formation, has more recently been complemented by approaches emphasizing the communal practice of low-threshold "produsage" (Bruns 2017). While produsage is commonly linked to an ideal of "participative journalism" and the emergence of "citizen journalism" (Cammaerts 2007), the diminished threshold for online content curation can also drive an opportunist process, where ultrapartisan produser

communities, emerging in distinct sphericules, seek to “reinforce” the public. In the “hybrid media system,” producers:

create, tap, or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable, or disable others’ agency, across and between a range of older and newer media settings [in] ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ forms. (Chadwick 2013:4)

This intimate interplay and discursive contestation in the interstices of “old” and “new” media—and the ensuing low-threshold opportunity structures for influencing public debate at large—are definitive characteristics of the hybrid media system. Most of these political opportunity structures stem from the introduction of inexpensive online tools and resource-light practices of “produsage” (Bruns 2008). These allow increased numbers of non- and semi-professional “producers” to fluidly transition between the positions of grassroots-level online discussant, networked gatekeeper, and mediators, curating content for their “gated” audiences to the extent that may even generate salient mainstream exposure for the “news-framed” curated content (Nahon 2015:47). By blurring the boundaries between curatorial and gatekeeping roles in journalistic content creation—and by eroding distinctions between professional and producer-based identities—the hybrid media system increasingly exerts influence upon various media spaces. Moreover, by allowing a variety of content to be news-framed—in the sense of being distributed specifically *as news* (Tuchmann 1978)—the hybrid media system facilitates producer-driven “construction of news” (Chadwick, Dennis, and Smith 2015:13–14).

We define “reinformation”¹ as the proactive, politically inspired, ideological, online community-driven side of produsage in the hybrid media system. In colloquial language, reinformation has for decades connoted “propaganda” or “indoctrination.” Since the early 2000s, the term and its inflected forms were reintroduced as a distinct concept in French media sociology, pertaining to the operative logic of emergent, rapidly expanding online fora (“réinfosphère”) that explicitly define their aim as counterbalancing the allegedly biased mainstream news coverage (Blanc 2016:197; Hare 2004; Jammet and Guidi 2017).

The body of scientific literature on online “produsage” of “reinformation” covers a range of approaches, from the injection of producer-generated content into the hybrid media system (Bruns and Burgess 2012; Rebillard 2017) and the crafting of memes as operative signs for mobilization (Shifman 2014) to the interaction of botnets and human audiences in the spread of this content (Ferrara 2017; Lazer et al. 2018). This article complements such approaches, providing in-depth, qualitative understanding of the produsage of reinformative, news-framed conspiracy stories, including practices that generate transnational coverage for this content within the hybrid media system.

During the 2000s, several “countermedia” outlets—such as *Fdesouche* (2004) and *Breitbart News* (2007) analyzed in this article—have successfully channeled “reinformation” across media spaces. By publishing content that merges fact and fiction in a spreadable, “alternative,” news-framed format, countermedia challenges “the established epistemic authorities” of “the liberal elite” in the mainstream media and in public office (Ylä-Anttila 2017). The spread of news-framed conspiracy stories—where “elites” wield power by secretly corrupting democratic institutions—exemplifies how countermedia operationalizes the “media populist logic” in the hybrid media system (Mudde 2007:251). Harnessing the reinformative toolkit as a set of rapid, resource-light, low-threshold practices of produsage, these outlets inject emotionalizing and polarizing content in the news cycle for the purpose of reinforming publics across media spaces (Maigrot, Kijak, and Claveau 2016).

Facilitating the curation and spread of reinformation, communities of grassroots-level producers form the countermedia’s “free, exploited labor” (Nixon 2015) as its “digital foot soldiers” (Hatakka 2016; Vaccari and Valeriani 2016). They commonly articulate an oxymoronic self-positioning as authoritative representatives of “the people” nevertheless “fighting the elite media with bows and arrows” (Copsey 1996; Pyrhönen 2015). Articulations of this pariah-like subject-position and the deeply affective, anti-establishment ethos form the core of political conspiracy theories, “rooted in and emerg[ing] from the very logic of populism” (Müller 2016:32).

Conveniently for the countermedia and its producer base, conspiracy story is an efficient narrative format for circulating reinformation in the hybrid media system. A recent, influential study by *Science* concluded that story-framed false information, particularly narratives on political topics, such as presidential elections, circulates “significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth” (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018). The authors point out that even the less connected, non-professional, grassroots-level (human) producers are significantly more efficient in generating spread for false information than more established producers in generating spread for accurate information, while both are more efficient than bots. This further underlines the importance of using the concept of reinformation in the analysis of how so-called “alt-right” producers, curating and narrating conspiratory content to a variety of audiences and publics (Nagle 2017), are able to harness new political opportunity structures in the hybrid media system.

The producers of reinformation seek to create narratives that must be repeatedly proven false in public. Once a conspiracy story starts to resonate strongly enough in the producer-driven reinfosphere, *this resonance itself* elevates the storyline’s newsworthiness in the mainstream sphere. The encompassing processes of rebuttal and fact checking in the mainstream space further

incentivize the produsage of reinformation across the hybrid media system. Once such a cycle emerges, it renders conspiracy stories like *Pizzagate* and *Voter fraud* even more nuanced and widely accessible (Barrera Rodriguez et al. 2018). Other conspiracy stories, such as *Macronleaks*, receive only transient coverage and fade away. This great variance in the narrative subject matter, reinformative produsage, and the actual outcomes of conspiracy stories calls for careful empirical analysis.

Indeed, underlying these theoretical insights is the empirical reality, where only certain reinformative storylines are able to secure persistently salient mainstream exposure, effectively establishing themselves as “public stories” (Feldman and Almqvist 2011), contemporary fables that people commonly “know of,” regardless of how they relate to them. In addition to the strategic dimensions related to produsage, it is also important to study the process by which conspiracy theorizing becomes an actual public story.

Drawing from Ann Swidler’s seminal work on cultural toolkits (1986) that has inspired recent sociological research on participative political practices and cultures (e.g., Eranti 2016; Luhtakallio 2012), we conceptualize toolkits as sets of collective practices that form “recognizable orientations toward the social world” (Ylä-Anttila 2017:7). As a key means for propagating the reinformative orientation—according to which established sources of information, particularly the mainstream media, are profoundly unreliable and intentionally misleading their audiences—producers of reinformation can be considered to harness a “reinformative toolkit.” This entails producers generating interventions into the mainstream news cycle through practices and techniques at the core of the reinformative pursuit—particularly through collective curation of spreadable, news-framed content, such as “leaks,” controversies, and scandals on polarizing, highly mediatized topics.

Going beyond the reinformative toolkit as a set of practices and techniques, in this article we also examine *conspiracy story* as a specific type and format of news-framed narrative subject matter that producers of reinformation rely on in the transnational context of hybridly mediatized presidential elections. By curating content—both freshly produced by the grassroots-level “digital foot soldiers” and news events covered by mainstream outlets—the producers of *Macronleaks*, *Pizzagate*, and *Voter fraud* engage in developing a recurring and skeletally adaptable “masterplot” (Abbott 2008:47) of an overarching conspiracy among a corrupted cabal of political and media elite.

Data and Methods: Assembling Conspiracy Stories for Analysis

In order to operationalize the three conspiracy stories for analysis, we first collect data concerning their origins and lifecycles in the hybrid media system. The timeframe for data collection begins in October 2016 when the *Pizzagate*

and *Voter Fraud* stories broke during the late stages of campaigning in the U.S. presidential elections. The timeframe ends in May 2017, when the media-tization of *Macronleaks* became subdued upon Emmanuel Macron's election as the president of France. During this eight-month timeframe, we inductively collected data from the output of 16 mainstream, 11 "countermedia," and 5 social media outlets that our preliminary research suggested had been actively covering one or more of the three conspiracy stories. We analyze the data, collected from the output from the 32 outlets (Table 1), illustrating in two sections *how* these conspiracy stories are produced as reinformation in the hybrid media system.

We first identify key nodes in the produsage or spread of the conspiracy stories, establishing the critical junctures when and where the stories and their specific elements gained and lost public attention. In order to achieve this, we first employ Google Trends for tracing the temporal development of the relative search frequencies for the titular queries "macronleaks," "pizzagate," and "voter fraud" (Figure 1).

There is a voluminous and expanding scholarship successfully harnessing Google Trends in inductive research design (Jun, Yoo, and Choi 2018). Selecting "right" or "best" search terms for data collection can be very difficult when doing research on more diffuse societal phenomena (a myriad of relevant queries for "gay marriage" being the case in point discussed by Reilly, Richey, and Benjamin Taylor 2012:152). However, Google Trends has been particularly successful and efficient for tracing specific kinds of sensational news events: political tumult, elections, public controversy, or disease outbreaks and epidemics (Dugas et al. 2012; Lazer et al. 2018). These events, much like the conspiracy stories studied here,² typically emerge during clearly delineated, pinpointable time periods, and are commonly marked by a large increase in highly specific or even unique search queries (such as "pizzagate"). As illustrated in the seminal work by Leskovec, Backstrom, and Kleinberg (2009), such "short, distinctive phrases [...] travel relatively intact through on-line text," allowing changes in certain search terms' frequencies to be operationalized into reliable indicators of the studied phenomenon's alternating salience in the news cycle.

In the first section of the analysis, we use the peaks and slumps in titular query frequencies, charted in the figure above, to locate the wax and wane of the public interest in the three conspiracy stories during the timeframe. Peaks and slumps in Google Trends only represent relative search frequency values, normalized by Google, not absolute volumes for specific queries. While this method does not allow assessing the overall salience of these conspiracy stories in the news cycle, we can operationalize the peaks and slumps as critical junctures—the moments of conspiracy stories' emergence, decline, or re-emergence

Table 1
List of Outlets Included in the Inductive Data Collection

Mainstream outlets	Countermedia outlets	Produser-driven outlets
20 minutes (macronleaks)	Anonews (pizzagate)	4chan (macronleaks and pizzagate)
BBC (all)	Breitbart (all)	Facebook (pizzagate)
Buzzfeed (pizzagate)	Disobedient Media (macronleaks)	Pastebin (macronleaks)
Fox News (pizzagate and voter fraud)	Dreutz.info (macronleaks)	Reddit (pizzagate)
Le Monde (macronleaks)	Fdesouche (macronleaks)	Twitter (all)
Le Nouvel Observateur (macronleaks)	WeSearchr (macronleaks)	
Le Parisien (macronleaks)	Résistance Républicaine (macronleaks)	
Le Point (macronleaks)	Révolution Vibratoire (pizzagate)	
Les Echos (macronleaks)	Riposte Laïque (macronleaks)	
L'Express (macronleaks)	The Red State Watcher (pizzagate)	
Libération (macronleaks)	We Got News (macronleaks)	
NBC (all)		
Slate (macronleaks)		
The Atlantic (all)		
The Guardian (all)		
The Washington Post (all)		

in the hybrid media system. Moreover, as we track each of the three titular queries in the same Google Trends search, we can compare the pervasiveness or the abruptness of change in search frequencies between the three titular queries.

After locating the critical junctures in the saliency of the three conspiracy stories, we proceed to identify the instances where the produsage of reinformation temporally coincides with, and possibly contributes to, the steepest shifts

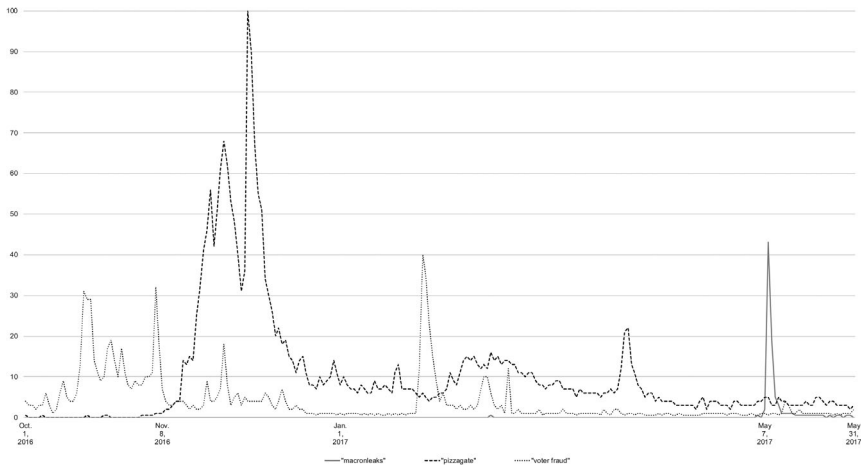


Figure 1 Temporal Development of Relative Frequencies for the Search Queries “Macronleaks,” “Pizzagate,” and “Voter Fraud” During the Timeframe (October 2016–May 2017).

in the titular query search frequency. This is established inductively by conducting the three titular search queries, restricted temporally to the specific dates of the peaks in question. We then generate a hybrid media dataset of articles, documents, tweets, pictures, memes, and forum posts by gathering samples of the top Google-indexed content for the date-specific titular queries. By reconstructing the three storylines around the critical junctures, the first section of analysis highlights producers’ use of the reinformative toolkit—particularly illustrating the pertinent *whens* (with regard to the other salient elements in the news cycle), *wheres* (dissemination on which kinds of fora), and *hows* (which techniques, strategies, and framings for injecting content into the news cycle are applied).

In the second section, we move into the comparative analysis of the conspiratory masterplot, focusing on the three renditions of the conspiracy story as a specific type of narrative vehicle for peddling the deeply suspicious, reinformative orientation toward the allegedly “elitist” agenda and means of information production. In the public eye, it often appears that producers generate the imaginatively conspiratory content out of thin air, pegging the question: “*How* can they come up with this crazy stuff?” Taking this question quite literally, we employ thematic coding (Gibbs 2007) of the media datasets generated in the first section, underlining the passages where the conspiracy story functions

as a reinformative rendition of an archetypical “masterplot” (Abbott 2008:47) on mainstream media’s complicity with the cabal of elites. By news-framing prosaic, contemporary events as manifestations of the conspiracy, the producers render the masterplot simultaneously new and newsworthy, while harnessing the archetypical nature of conspiracy story to keep the storyline familiar and relatable enough for reinforming old and new potential audiences.

Analyzing the Produsage of Reinformation: Conspiracy Stories in the Hybrid Media System

Tracing the Critical Junctures of News Cycle Intervention

Macronleaks first broke on Friday May 5, 2017, just four hours before the official end of the campaign and the subsequent 44-hour campaign reporting embargo mandated by the French law. The conspiracy is revealed in a 9-giga-byte corpus of documents, consisting of tens of thousands of e-mails and photos hacked in a cyberattack on *La République En Marche*, the political movement created by Macron. The leaked corpus was a mixture of fake content injected into the bulk of authentic documents (Figure 2).

The critical junctures of *Macronleaks* unraveled at a remarkably rapid pace. At 18:00 (UTC), the material was distributed on an anonymous site for sharing documents *Pastebin* under the title “EMLEAKS.” At 18:35, the *Pastebin* link appeared on the online imageboard *4chan*, posted by an unidentified source. The abrupt beginning of the public exposure for *Macronleaks* on May 5 is traceable to the tweet by the alt-right producer Jack Posobiec, an American pro-Trump activist and self-described “citizen journalist” with 100,000 followers at the time (534,200 in September 2019). This first reference to #MacronLeaks, tweeted at 18:49, was retweeted 15 times within a minute and 87

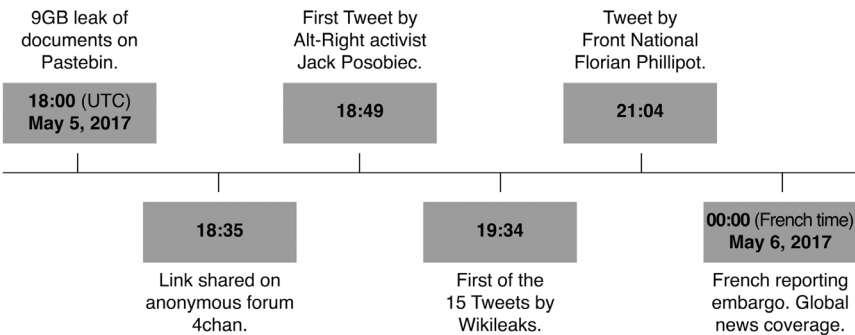


Figure 2 The Critical Junctures in *Macronleaks*’ Produsage.

times during the next 5 minutes, which indicates extensive use of botnets (@DFRLab 2017).

The next alt-right producer to tweet the story was William Craddick, the founder and editor-in-chief of *Disobedient media* and journalist at *Zero Hedge*, both American countermedia outlets. Self-proclaimed “discoverer of *Pizzagate*,” Craddick was also the first person to tweet about Macron’s alleged bank account on the Cayman Islands two days earlier under the hashtag #macron-gate. Both Posobiec and Craddick instantly retweeted each other, underlining the intimate collaboration between the two producers of *Macronleaks* and its lesser known precursor *Macrongate*.

Within an hour, *WikiLeaks* had tweeted on #MacronLeaks 15 times, although admitting that it might be a “practical joke” by *4chan*. *WikiLeaks* was the single most mentioned account in the *Macronleaks* Twitter storm (Downing and Ahmed 2019), accounting for almost 20 percent of the all coverage. However, the combined tweets from Posobiec, Craddick, and *Disobedient Media* also amounted to 21.8 percent (@DFRLab 2017) of the coverage.

The *Twitter* activity was almost equally divided between accounts in the United States and France during the first hours. The story quickly attracted attention in France, facilitated by the right-wing populist *Front National* party. Just 20 minutes before the French embargo on electoral reporting, Florian Philippot, the main advisor to the party leader Marine Le Pen, tweeted (translation by the authors):

Will the #Macronleaks teach us that investigative journalism has been deliberately silenced? This democratic wreck is appalling.

With the embargo in effect from the midnight May 6 onward, French newspapers announced that they could not circulate any of the leaked documents. However, many countermedia sites, including *Dreuz.info*, spread the story vigorously. With the help of Posobiec and other American producers, these French outlets published content from *Got News* and *We Searchr* (Figure 3).

On May 6, the single day of *Macronleaks* peak, the campaign offered a short press release, stating that it had been subject to an extensive data breach and a carefully planned information operation. This data breach angle, rather than the leaked evidence of alleged corruption, was also the dominant frame in international news reporting since May 6 (Ahmed and Downing 2017:3). Notwithstanding the initially successful intervention in the hybridized news cycle with timely applied techniques in the reinformative toolkit, *Macronleaks* provided Macron’s campaign a unique and unexpected opportunity to gain mainstream exposure during the embargo. Macron was able to reveal the reinformation campaign against him, while also dodging any substantial discussion

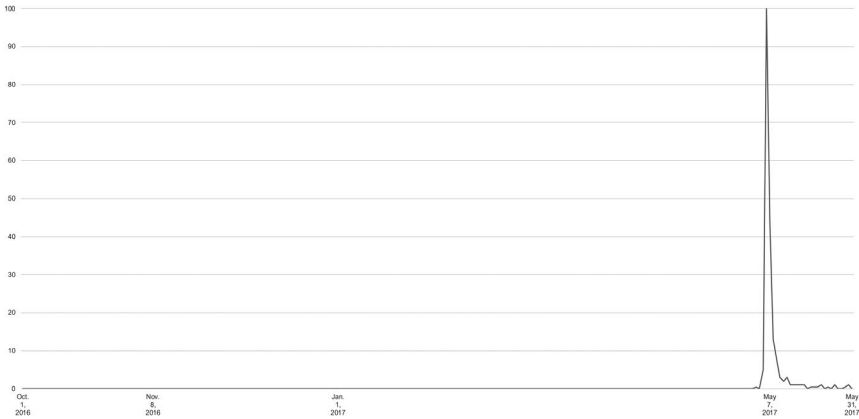


Figure 3 The Temporal Distribution of the “Macronleaks” Search Query (October 2016–May 2017).

on the allegations entailed in the conspiracy story, which were soon further overshadowed by his landslide victory. This, together with the relatively small producer base, likely contributed to the rapid decline in the story’s spread (Figure 4).

Similar to *Macronleaks*, *Pizzagate* originated as the result of hacked and leaked presidential campaign e-mail exchange. However, the six-month window for producing *Pizzagate* was hundreds of times longer than that of *Macronleaks* and marked by two separate phases where the reinformative toolkit was

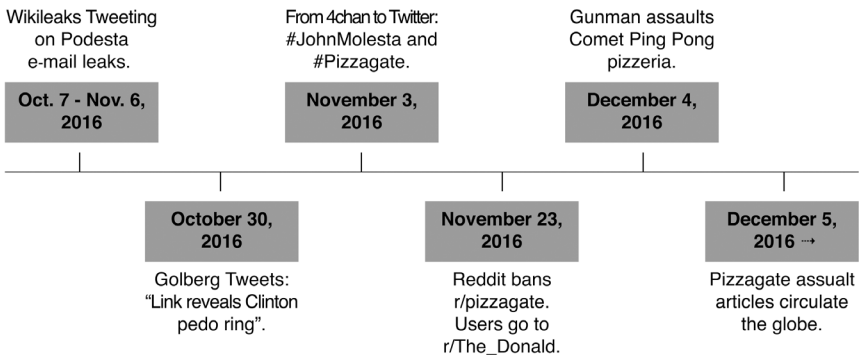


Figure 4 The Critical Junctures in *Pizzagate's* Produsage.

successfully applied by the producers. Already in March 2016, the personal e-mail account of John Podesta, chairman of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, was hacked by *Fancy Bear*, a cyber-espionage group linked by several state intelligence services to the Russian military intelligence agency, the GRU (Valisluureamet [Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service] 2018:53). Six months later, during the last month of the U.S. presidential elections, *WikiLeaks* founded *The Podesta Emails* series, leaking the body of some 20,000 pages of compromised e-mail exchange. From October 7 to November 6—just two days before the Election Day—*WikiLeaks* had tweeted 57 times on the Podesta leak, with half of the tweets receiving over 10,000 shares or likes.

The second phase started at the late stages of *WikiLeaks'* *Twitter* campaign, when the (subsequently deleted) white supremacist account @DavidGoldbergNY tweeted on a pedophile ring linked to Clinton on October 30. Referring to the Podesta e-mails and “my NYPD sources” investigating Anthony Weiner (Clinton's vice campaign manager's husband), “Goldberg” further alleged that the police were currently investigating Clinton's involvement in the scandal. During the next few days, American countermedia outlets such as *Anonews* and *The Red State Watcher*, published several articles, shared over 100,000 times on *Facebook*, arguing that the Podesta leak confirms Clinton's involvement.

On November 3, several *4chan* users suggested that the Podesta e-mails contained passages written in coded language used by pedophiles, encouraging others to “search for [...] possible doublespeak keywords in Wikileaks,” with references to “cheese pizza” or “CP” presented as placeholders for “child pornography.” During the same day, links to this content were spread to *Twitter* for the first time, using the hashtags #JohnMolesta and #pizzagate. This interpretation started featuring in Google search hits for “pizzagate” a few days after the elections, right after *WikiLeaks'* strategic electoral campaign against Clinton had ended (Figure 5).

The late peaking of “pizzagate” search queries underlines the significance of *WikiLeaks* abandoning its position as the single authoritative outlet for narrating the Podesta hack. This created a vacuum within which grassroots-level producers could apply the reinformative toolkit to reappropriate the existing storyline and start injecting elements of the conspiracy story into the hybrid media news cycle, apparently independent of any strategic or political guidance. By mid-November, the intensity of this collective curation had generated a critical mass of controversy within many prominent producer communities, while still mostly remaining under the radar of the wider public and the mainstream media. During this time, the conspiracy theory had evolved to the point where the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington, D.C., was established as the venue of alleged pedophilia ring. The turning point in the mainstream media

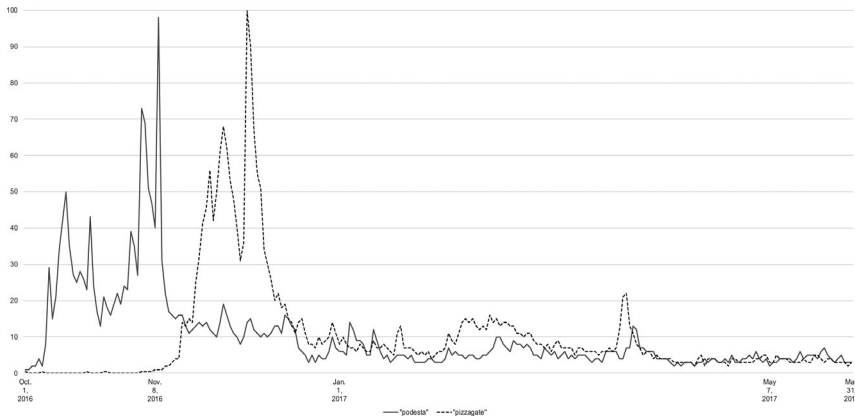


Figure 5 The Transition from “Podesta” to “Pizzagate” Search Queries.

attention took place on November 21 and 22, when several outlets reported on the hundreds of death threats sent to the pizzeria staff. On November 23, *Reddit* closed the r/pizzagate subreddit as violence inciting.

As the closure was widely reported in the mainstream media, conspiracy theorizing intensified among the produser communities and on social media. The produsers, however, gained legitimizing support from Donald Trump’s transition team, when Michael Flynn Jr. tweeted on December 4:

Until Pizzagate proven to be false, it’ll remain a story. The left seems to forget #PodestaE-mails and the many ‘coincidences’ tied to it.

The breaking of news on *Pizzagate* in international headlines took place the next day, contingent on a gunman assaulting the pizzeria to “investigate *Pizzagate*.” After this, there was no new, high-profile coverage of *Pizzagate* in the mainstream news cycle. Having briefly attracted the transient spotlight of mainstream media in the form of global coverage for the conspiracy story, the produsers were no longer able to apply to reinformative toolkit to inject “alternative” framings in the news cycle beyond the countermedia and online image boards. *Pizzagate*, however, continued to inspire a transnational community of conspiracy theorists to produse content within anonymous social media spherules and has been periodically featured in the mainstream media as an cautionary exemplar of the dangers of “fake news” (see Porter 2018; Figure 6).

Unlike *Pizzagate* and *Macronleaks* that originated in the respective years of the most recent presidential elections, public debate surrounding voter fraud extends back decades in American political history (Levitt 2007). As a term,

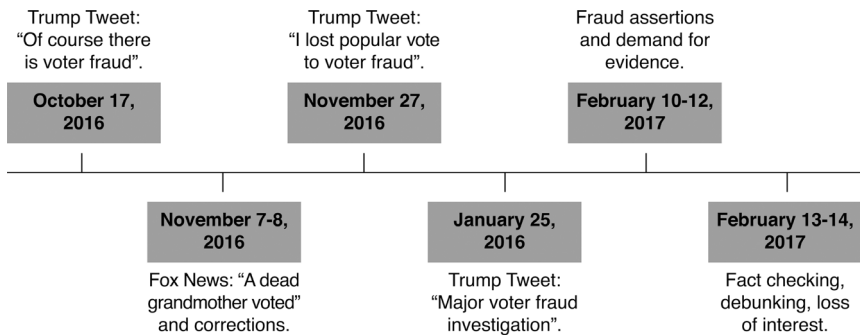


Figure 6 The Critical Junctures in *Voter Fraud*'s Produsage.

"voter fraud" also pertains to a wide range of phenomena that have very little resemblance to each other, ranging from individual voter impersonation to more systemic means of electoral manipulation, such as voter coercion and vote buying. While these debates typically intensify during the American presidential elections, Trump used his *Twitter* account to propel *Voter fraud* to high unprecedented mainstream coverage.³

Trump only tweeted on the topic of voter fraud ten times before 2016, never breaking the threshold of one thousand likes or retweets. During 2016, he tweeted 13 times on *Voter fraud*, eight of them originating within a month of the Election Day. On October 17, Trump initiated the *Voter fraud* conspiracy theory with his most liked tweet on the topic at the time, alleging that the upcoming elections were rigged:

Of course there is large scale voter fraud happening on and before election day. Why do Republican leaders deny what is going on. So naive!

Many news outlets reported this tweet, with most Google search activity emerging in conjunction with *Fox News*' sensationalist coverage. On the eve of the Election Day, the TV channel incorrectly claimed that an individual had voted on behalf of his dead grandmother (who soon turned out to be alive).

Google searches for "voter fraud" started proliferating one month before the presidential election, peaking twice before rapidly declining to pre-election levels the day after. This one-month timeframe is business as usual for premeditated electoral smear campaigns in general (Vaccari and Morini 2014; Figure 7).

Up until that point, public attention for the *Voter fraud* conspiracy theory had followed the pattern of Google searches of *WikiLeaks*' Podesta campaign ("podesta") and the "voter fraud" searches emerging in earlier U.S. presidential

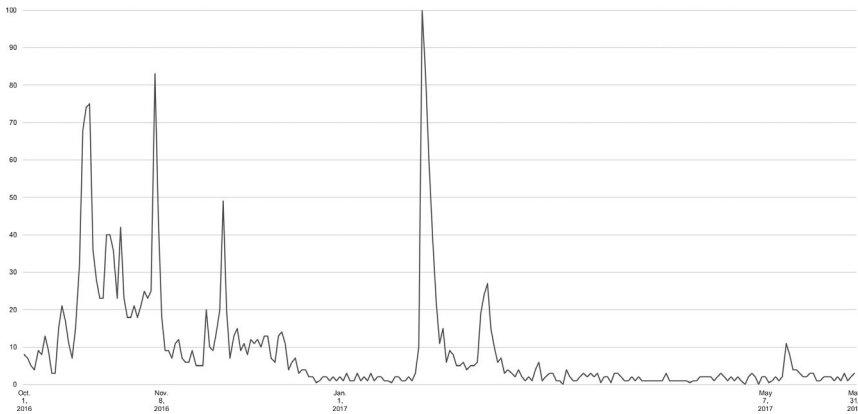


Figure 7 The Temporal Distribution of the “Voter Fraud” Search Query (October 2016–May 2017).

elections in the 2000s. From this perspective, Trump’s embrace of the critical mainstream exposure of his voter fraud narrative is a text-book instance of media populist logic (Ellinas 2009), whereby “bad press” becomes “good press,” especially as it was narrated as evidence of “the corrupt mainstream media” being after “the people’s man.”

However, as a campaign harnessing the reinformative toolkit, *Voter fraud* should not be analyzed only from the perspective of electoral strategy. Although right-wing populist politicians commonly seek any and all coverage before their breakthrough, they commonly avoid critical media attention after being elected (Ellinas 2010:206–7). Supported by thousands of online producers particularly on *Twitter*, Trump adopted precisely the opposite approach, bathing in the flak from mainstream outlets by fanning the flames of the conspiracy after his election. Trump’s second voter fraud tweet to exceed the threshold of 100,000 like came as late as January 25, 2017, calling for a “major investigation into VOTER FRAUD.” News outlets internationally first called for and soon reported the results of their fact checking, debunking the claims of voter fraud in February. However, these articles were only modestly shared on social media (thousands rather than hundreds of thousands of shares).

There was something quite unprecedented in the continued produsage of reinformation on voter fraud conspiracy theorizing *after* the elections. The prolonged critical mainstream exposure enhanced in several ways *Voter fraud*’s capacity to reappropriate the old voter fraud narrative—particularly among the countermedia outlets spearheaded by *Breitbart News*. For instance, for each of

the 34 articles on *Voter fraud* published in the four-month period between October 2016 and February 2017 in *The Wall Street Journal*, the newspaper with the largest circulation in the United States, *Breitbart News* published 132 articles, almost quadrupling the *WSJ* coverage. This allowed the Trump-championing countermedia to claim ownership and authorship of the pre-established, historical voter fraud narrative. Successful harnessing of the reinformative toolkit by online producers and the countermedia facilitated *Voter fraud*'s entry into the mainstream news cycle as a spectacle full of drama and controversy, justifying the media attention on *Voter fraud*. By narrating *Voter fraud* as an extremely important story to be debunked, the "elite media" actually behaved exactly as suggested by the reinformative narrative. For large American constituencies, the endeavors of debunking *Voter fraud* in the mainstream media still linger on as evidence of media elites' expansive cover-up of the conspiracy against the American people.

Analyzing the Conspiracy Story as a Reinformative Masterplot

In the previous section, we identified the critical junctures in the produsage of the conspiracy stories and the practices for intervening the news cycle with the reinformative toolkit. In this section, we expand the analysis to a specific narrative device in the hybrid media system, focusing on the conspiracy story as a reinformative masterplot, and the narrative practices for presenting prosaic, news-framed content as manifestations of "the conspiracy."

Notwithstanding the divergent motifs invoked in their narrative subject matter, *Macronleaks*, *Pizzagate*, and *Voter fraud* each call the audience to internalize an overarching belief in the unreliability of any authoritative sources of information. Carrying an emancipatory promise of "lifting the veil of lies" woven by "the corrupt elite," the conspiracy story is an enticing format for advancing reinformation, relying upon countermedia as the "alternative," anti-establishment source of information.

There is a twofold challenge in successfully introducing conspiratory content into the hybridly mediatized political news cycle through the reinformative toolkit. On the one hand, the conspiracy story must be linked to contemporary phenomena that can be presented to the audience *as news*, acutely relevant, topical, and significant to properly grasp (Tuchmann 1978). On the other hand, the producers of this topical news-framed content must also inject adequate references or allusions to an archetypical masterplot of an overarching conspiracy which serves as the interpretative lens that endows the news-framed content with a desired kind of (reinformative) meaning (Abbott 2008:154–55).

The audience of a successful rendition of the masterplot experiences a "déjà-vu" that transforms a mundane, news-framed content into an embodiment of "the conspiracy", thereby realizing the emancipatory promise of the audience

becoming privy of “a dark secret” that “the elite” is concealing from “the masses.” Through constant, modular interplay of topical and archetypal narrative components, the circulation of conspiracy stories in hybrid media with new configurations of tropes expands rather than depletes it (Pappas and Aslanidis 2015).

Macronleaks is a classical conspiracy story whose protagonist is a corrupt elite cabal working behind the scenes. It follows the tradition of the “cabinet noir,” a term coined in the seventeenth-century France for Cardinal Richelieu’s office that opened the letters of King Louis XIV’s opponents. During the 2017 campaign, several candidates suggested that the mainstream media and the judicial system are controlled by the highest echelons of the political elite, who form a sinister “cabinet noir” intent on impeding the realization of the “popular will.” According to former presidential candidate François Fillon, the judicial system and the media were manipulated by François Hollande to undermine Fillon. Marine Le Pen likewise alluded to the existence of a “cabinet noir” inspiring an extensive debate across the countermedia.

The clear strategy behind the *Macronleaks* was to appear as an authentic leak, modeled after the 2015 *Panama Papers*. The documents produced were an attempt to give the audience the impression that *Macronleaks* constitutes a major news event on a massive leak that unveils a world-scale scandal. The first attempt to expose Macron’s alleged corruption was through accusations of illicit money transfers. The initial leak, which materialized a week earlier in the form of *Macrongate*, identifies Macron as the owner of an offshore bank account, purportedly used for tax evasion and money laundering. As *Macrongate* failed to spread (despite Craddick’s and Posobiec’s efforts, and Marine Le Pen’s in the last televised debate), it was hurriedly modified into *Macronleaks* in less than a week.

Macronleaks discussed not only Macron’s “shady” businesses, but emphasized his allegedly “corrupt” lifestyle and his “Machiavellian” masterplan. In order to recount a less technical and more emotive story, a mixture of hastily produced “incriminating” e-mails and financial documents were injected into an authentic corpus of leaked exchange, alleging an interplay of various forms of corruption of both the body and the soul. Macron was presented working toward the large-scale Islamization of France: introducing compulsory Arabic in schools, accepting all applications of asylum, and electing an Imam to lead the country.

As a further attempt to make the story “juicier,” *Macronleaks* also produced content on Macron’s “sexual deviance” with “supporting evidence.” Countermedia sites *Got News* and *We Searchr*—owned by Chuck Johnson, a former writer for *Breitbart News*—provided “proof” of the candidate purchasing gay lingerie online. *We Searchr* wondered why the “favorite candidate of

the media” was hiding his preference for men, promising a \$50,000 reward to anyone proving Macron’s homosexuality. Macron was also accused of purchasing and consuming cocaine, “evidenced” in e-mails allegedly written by his advisor, Raphaël Coulhon. Harnessing the motifs of sex, drugs, and money, *Macronleaks* narrates a classical constellation of corruption in order to discredit the candidate on all possible fronts.

In the case of *Pizzagate*’s produsage, the delayed commencement points to a specific news-framing challenge in harnessing the reinformative toolkit: How to render Clinton’s campaign manager’s e-mail leak—six-month-old, mundane, and dry textual material—both a topical event, and one that can reinform its audiences of an overarching conspiracy? The meager traceable evidence of any storyline evolving during the six-month period after *Fancy Bear*’s hack of John Podesta’s e-mails in March 2016 is telling of the initial lack of perceived newsworthiness and conspiratory significance in *Pizzagate*’s the source material.

However, beginning in October 2016, one month before the elections, *WikiLeaks* started its daily *Twitter* coverage of the Podesta hack. As opposed to *WikiLeaks*’ brief coverage of *Macronleaks*, *Pizzagate*’s source material underwent sustained circulation, evidenced in over 1,000 daily shares and likes in *Twitter*. This had the effect of establishing the topicality and electoral importance of Podesta’s e-mails six months after they were leaked, vesting the leak with a pinpointable peak in public attention. Although the e-mails proved to be largely void of any incriminatingly conspiratory discoveries on the Clinton campaign, the attention roused producers in swaths. A chaotic form of collective symbolic exegesis became the definitive tool through which producers started compiling a synopsis for *Pizzagate* that could, notwithstanding its internal conflicts, reinform audiences in accordance to the conspiratory masterplot.

Based on conspiratory readings of Podesta’s e-mails, *Pizzagate* first emerged as repeated *shitpostings* of a joke in which thousands of producers participated across designated online fora, such as *4chan*, *Pastebin*, and *Reddit*. “[C]haracterized by its disruption of previously established standards of discourse” (McEwan 2017:19), shitposting added two intertwined, strongly affective layers—tragedy and comedy—as the yeast into the conspiratorial dough. As many producers chose, often jocularly, to treat e-mails as coded language, they invited each other to collaborate in divining the wicked and hidden practices of the conspiratory elite from the prosaic passages detailing Podesta’s dining habits.

The process of collective curation, chaotic as it was, followed certain prescribed guidelines. Similar to the ancient Roman practice of haruspicy—where omens were read in entrails of sacrificial animals—producers used pizza-related excerpts as the divinatory leitmotif around which the conspiracy story was named and hashtagged. Indeed, “cheese pizza” and “CP” were used as pertinent

expressions for child pornography on online image boards already in the early 2000s, becoming introduced in the *Urban Dictionary* in 2010. This provided the producers both an inspiration *and* a reference for reinforcing their audiences.

Unlike *Macronleaks* and *Voter fraud*, *Pizzagate* succeeded in also injecting a concrete call to action into the synopsis for those inclined to relate to the conspiracy story as a thriller and tragedy, rather than a comedy. *Pizzagate* reified the conspiracy from the mythical realm back to the mundane world by naming the (non-existent) basement of *Comet Ping Pong* pizzeria as the location where the conspiracy of the pedophile political cabal convenes. By November, this rendition of the masterplot had contributed to the channeling of death threats to the pizzeria's patron James Alefantis (mispronounced, with effort, as "J'aime les enfants," French for "I love children"). As the thoroughly reinforced gunman attacked the pizzeria in December, the conspiratory myth finally became a mainstream news event of a contemporary fable to be dissected, deconstructed, dispelled, and debunked.

The synopsis of *Voter fraud* differs from the other two conspiracy stories in the extent to which it is modeled after a familiar set recurring of voter fraud allegations, evidenced in the cyclical pattern of peaking "voter fraud" search queries during the U.S. presidential elections. Even so, the conspiratory masterplot sets the 2016 synopsis apart from these earlier renditions of voter fraud, instead aligning the storyline with *Macronleaks* and *Pizzagate*.

While the asserted scale of illegal voting, ranging from thousands to millions of people voting illegally, coincides with the allegations launched during earlier elections, the scale of the underlying conspiracy is presented as radically more deeply rooted in 2016. In addition to pointing the blame to corrupted Democrats who benefit from "illegal" votes, Trump questions the reasons for the "naïveté" and "denialism" among the "Republican leaders." This way, Trump harnesses the conspiratory masterplot according to which the tendrils of corruption run much deeper within the political elite than previously thought, allegedly involving wide swaths of the establishment across the partisan divide.

The 2016 rendition of voter fraud as an elevated bipartisan crisis, spearheaded by Trump's public performance of the rekindled crisis, had important implications that also contributed to *Voter fraud's* consistent and persistent coverage by mainstream media. Previous voter fraud champions—such as John McCain, who operationalized a limited and strictly partisan variant of the narrative in 2008—struggled to articulate why they had not been able to bring about a party-wide, let alone bipartisan, coalition to fight voter fraud (Berlet 2010). By operationalizing the conspiratory masterplot, Trump adopted a messianic position as an "external political figure" who could "dry the swamp" of ubiquitous systemic corruption. Emphasizing the encompassing scale of the

conspiracy, Trump and the permanent echo of online producers could reach and electrify also those audiences who remained relatively indifferent to the previous, smaller scale allegations of voter fraud.

By continuing to tweet about *Voter fraud* for months after the elections, and receiving an increased number of likes, retweets and further media attention, Trump was able to circumvent one of the most obvious critiques of *Voter fraud* as the conspiracy theory as a means to either securing votes or justifying losing. Indeed, if one were to interpret *Voter fraud* strictly as an electoral strategy like its earlier manifestations, it would be hard to explain why Trump had not only continued to keep the easily debunked narrative alive, but also had been more successful in spreading it after his election.

Conclusion: Divergent Avenues for Producing Hybrid Media Reinformation

The second decade of the 2000s has seen the proliferation of arguments, both within and outside academia, on whether we are living a “post-truth era.” Some have challenged the whole notion, commonly pointing out that there has never been an era in which politicians did not lie (Korvela et al. 2017; Mariscal 2017:6; Stein 2017). By analyzing the wax and wane of three conspiracy stories that featured abundantly in the hybrid media system, we suggest a range of more nuanced approaches for studying “post-truthfulness” as the process of reinformation that shifts the focus beyond the mere juxtaposition of facts and lies.

Although conspiracy stories do spawn and spread imaginative disinformation in highly divergent narrative shapes and forms, their producers do not primarily peddle *information*. By employing a set of techniques in the reinformative toolkit for intervening the news cycle, they spread a paranoid, “quasi-religious” *orientation* (Franks, Bangerter, and Bauer 2013) toward the social world, articulated in the masterplot of a ubiquitous conspiracy among the “the elite”—a catch-all term for politicians, mainstream media, and democratic institutions at large.

As reinformation operates within the realm of collective identification among the “underdogs” of “the media war” (Copsey 1996:123), attempts to counter this profoundly suspicious orientation toward social world by “fact checking” and “debunking” fake news can only yield modest results. *Macron-leaks*, *Pizzagate*, and *Voter fraud* are all renditions of the masterplot that invites the audience to collectively identify as “disenfranchised” citizens, the underdogs, who must rely on “alternative” sources of information in order to become the counterforce to the corrupt elite and its gatekeeping henchmen in the mainstream media.

Although the synopses of the three conspiracy stories embody the same masterplot, our analysis points to a great variance in how the producers of the stories relate to and participate in storytelling. On the one end of the spectrum, *Pizzagate*'s produsage is marked by a distinct aura of "carnavalesque" (Bakhtin 1968), whereby producers organically form an "in-joke" collectivity around "shitposting," "memes," and "lulz" (Murray and Lemieux 2019:82). While "the satanic pedophile cabal of political elite, convening in the basement of a D.C. pizzeria" is a fitting motif for reifying the anti-elite masterplot, it is clearly not an ideal vehicle for credibly advancing any real-world political agenda. This suggests that for many of the producers, instead of a shared political goal or belief, the act of participating in the collective curation of the phantasmal visual and textual iconography is an end in itself. The resulting shape and magnitude in which *Pizzagate* spread across hybrid and mainstream media could not be envisioned, let alone controlled, by neither *WikiLeaks* nor the Russian Podesta hackers when they made the source content available.

On the other end of the spectrum, *Macronleaks*' produsage features many characteristics that could be conceptualized as "strategic." Orchestrated top-down by two identifiable alt-right figures, Posobiec and Craddick, there is little traceable evidence of grassroots-level involvement in its produsage. Unlike *Pizzagate*'s six-month incubation period from the initial leak, *Macronleaks* was first channeled to its audiences only two days before the elections. As a reinformative "precision strike," the lack of time and human resources turned *Macronleaks* into a slightly customized version of 2015 *Panama Papers* controversy, with only a few doctored e-mails injected into the leak to suggest Macron's homosexuality and rampant cocaine use.

Compared to the other two conspiracy theories, *Voter fraud* successfully combined both organic content development by a myriad of online producers while still maintaining distinct strategic control over the storyline. Harnessing a pre-existing narrative template can greatly facilitate early stages of produsage, as only minute cues suffice for conjuring up a sense of familiarity with another news-framed scandal, such as *Panama Papers* for *Macronleaks* or earlier voter fraud allegations for *Voter fraud*. However, such legacy can also make it harder to articulate a conspiracy theory's topicality "here and now." This, together with a less developed online sphere for political debate, likely contributed to the limited spread and impact of previous voter fraud allegations.

Voter fraud sought to circumvent the challenge of newsworthiness by framing the conspiracy in a manner that transcended the tired partisan smear campaign by linking it to the masterplot of an overarching conspiracy. Generating *Voter fraud* and steering its produsage with his tweets, Trump presented "the elite" at large—including establishment Republicans—at least tacitly complicit through their long-standing denial or ignorance of *Voter fraud*. Unlike

with *Macronleaks*, Trump's strategic control did not impede capitalizing on more organically evolving content. Asserted occurrences of illegal voting—initially reported as news events by sympathetic countermedia outlets—were soon covered by mainstream outlets who generated spread for the conspiracy theory they sought to debunk.

Each of the conspiracy stories studied was successful in crossing the threshold of mainstream gatekeeping, notwithstanding the varying persistence of their coverage. Instrumental in this success is the free labor voluntarily put in by the producers as digital foot soldiers, generating spread across hybrid media spaces. The analysis of producers' involvement in the collective curation of the conspiracy stories illustrates how the reinformative toolkit is harnessed in public storytelling.

By developing means for intervening the hybridly mediatized news cycle via social media and countermedia outlets with various "leaks" and "scandals," the producers both draw from and replenish the range of techniques in the toolkit. With regard to the narrative subject matter, presidential elections as a deeply polarizing media event offer fertile ground for merging the archetypical masterplot of "the elites" conspiracy with topical and mundane, news-framed components covered daily in the mainstream media. The sustained engagement by the collectivity of online producers collectivity, such as the one echoing the Trump-led rendition of *Voter fraud* long after his election, exemplifies how conspiracy stories can outlive and transcend any strategic, political aspirations that gave them birth. This involvement informs and expands future pursuits of reinformation, both in terms of repertoires of social action and narrative devices.

ENDNOTES

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¹Although the French variant "réinformation" has been used as a distinct term in scientific publications on medicine, biology, and exegesis from 1920s onwards, the aforementioned use in social scientific research can be traced back to the post-war era (on Allied endeavors to penetrate the censorship practices of former axis countries, see Joseph 1947).

²It is important to note, however, that while "macronleaks" and "pizzagate" queries provide results in Google that are unique to the conspiracy story in question, the query "voter fraud" also links to the concept of voter fraud and earlier controversies that we do not include in these analyses.

³Before 2016, the Google search frequency for the query "voter fraud" was only matched during the late stages of Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign.

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